

[In May and June 2024, Richard was entered into a board-wide King Tournament to determine which male character would be dubbed "King of /qst/". I wrote a number of in-character excerpts from his perspective. While the tournament is non-canonical to the timeline of Drowned Quest Redux (or is it...?), the excerpts are true to Richard's character and may contain interesting fragments of information. I have done my best to provide [baseline context] for each excerpt, but for completeness, you may like to check out the original qualifiers thread: <https://suptg.thisisnotatrueending.com/qstarchive/2024/5961634> and the original tournament thread: <https://suptg.thisisnotatrueending.com/qstarchive/2024/6014808>. Enjoy!]

[QM note: Richard enters the tournament and answers some questions about himself.]

>AN EXCERPT FROM THE DILIGENT NOTE-TAKING OF CORRESPONDENT #314, UNOFFICIALLY AND QUESTIONABLY KNOWN AS "RICHARD," AFTER HIS ENTRANCE INTO AN INTERDIMENSIONAL "HUSBANDO TOURNAMENT"

"...have been, if not trapped, then at least shunted into an unquantifiable space— though not unqualifiable; it is a pallid grey-blue. There are twelve males here, excluding myself; ten excluding myself and the animals, though including the lizard-boy, whom, despite his stature and unserious attitude, I sense relation in. A mutated form of ourselves? A degenerated one? The WYRM would not be pleased, but they say the WYRM is never pleased, except when it is sleeping. I will write more on this later.

There are females in this "tournament," though they are undergoing a selection process elsewhere. Presumably those that fail to qualify will be (at best) recycled, or failing that disposed of. I am told that Charlie is ineligible for participation; she may be in the "audience," wherever that is located. If she is safe, there is no worry. I am sure she will "win" (such as it is) at cheering. For myself, I am unconcerned; I trust that I will proceed unimpeded. My compatriots (such as they are) also appear to trust in this, though this could be due to a lack of reflection on their parts, or a lack of ability to reflect. I am not surrounded by the universe's brightest minds.

To occupy us while we wait for judgement, we have been distributed questionnaires— yes, including to the animals. I have reviewed it several times and have determined that it appears to be, to borrow a phrase, "taking the piss." That being said, it's prudent to comply with forces that can rip one through dimensions; therefore my responses follow.

>Can you maintain a proper posture throughout the day?

Yes. Though I wouldn't know what the 'proper posture' is for a snake.

>Could you beat a toddler?

I wrangle a toddler every waking hour of my life.

>Could you beat a dog?

I suppose so.

>Could you beat a homeless guy on crack?

...

...

A drug that causes erratic behavior? I see. I am prohibited from directly interfering with the outside world, I should note. Could Charlie defeat a drugged man, suffering from exposure to the elements? She could. I don't believe she would need my assistance.

>A police man?

Charlie could defeat a policeman. If he were armed, I would be delighted to assist with dearming him.

>A swat team officer?

...

"Special Weapons And Tactics?" Why not just say so? Yes, as above.

>A soldier?

I fail to see how this is more challenging than the above.

>The Terminator?

...

...

...

A fictional character? A machine that appears human? I understand how that feels. Did it ever want for anything more?

...

Ah, could it be defeated? Yes, Charlie could defeat it, if she were properly assisted.

>Mecha Hitler?

...

...

A warmonger who killed many millions? Who is also a machine... or who is controlling the machine? Does he have any personal facility with combat, or did he sit in a chair and issue commands remotely? Hah. ...I believe this would be less difficult than the previous challenge.

>Do moderate weight lifting?

Are they real weights?

>Run for a mile without stopping

I am afraid that Charlotte has imposed on me the body of an aging and not particularly athletic human male. Fortunately, I have no need to run.

>Survive being hit with a loaded garbage truck

This is curiously specific. This is not my body, so no harm can come to me.

...Except for that. But we won't discuss that.

>Survive being hit by an entire corn silo

Again with the specificity. I take it this is some kind of building? It is the same result.

>Being shot in the face

I could have my head cut off and it would do nothing.

>Being thrown into outer space

Does this mean the void? Anti-reality? I would be destroyed utterly, as would all things composed of Law. Except, of course, for the WYRM.

>A round of SS13

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A game? Played on boxes?

...

...

I see. I think I would be very good at this game.

>Getting thrown off Hell In A Cell

I dare say I wouldn't bother falling the entire 16 feet. I could still appear on top of the table, if that would be desirable.

>Perform any supernatural deeds

My deeds are entirely natural. They may seem otherwise to the ignorant. Are you ignorant?

>Cure OP's raging faggotry

I have no interest in hearing about human sexual relations.

>Post an additional image over the thread limit

...

...

Box-to-box communication... ah, like the messaging system. It should be simple for any halfway-clever individual to modify, no?

>Add more inane questions to this list

Don't you see? It is taking the piss. No matter. My responses are done. Soon comes judgment."

>AN EXCERPT FROM THE DILIGENT NOTE-TAKING OF CORRESPONDENT #314, UNOFFICIALLY AND QUESTIONABLY KNOWN AS "RICHARD," AFTER HIS ENTRANCE INTO AN INTERDIMENSIONAL "HUSBANDO TOURNAMENT"

"...I fear the previous questionnaire was insufficient; or, more accurately, it has inspired my 'compatriots' to ask their own frivolous (or else invasive) questions of one another. They appear to think this is all in great fun, and not an activity deliberately seeded to draw personal information out of us. This, or they are more cunning than anticipated, and they truly are filing away the answers to these questions for later use. It is too early to determine. For now, to overtly withdraw myself could be dangerous. It never pays to make oneself the center of attention, particularly when some of the females appear to hew closer to the WYRM than they do to me.

In any case, many of these questions appear—for now—harmless. I will smile when I give the answers and I will nod or laugh cordially when I hear the answers of others. How tight the chains of socializing pull. Here."

>What tool do you prefer for the occult? A wand? A staff?

"I do not practice the occult. I am not a magician and I am not a walker of the Road. These are human obsessions. Consequently I'm certain Charlotte would like it very much if I used a wand or staff, particularly if I made sparkles come out of it. I prefer my bare hands."

>Cockles - how do you like to have them?

"I have never eaten cockles and likely never will. If this is meant to be an innuendo, I have no interest in hearing about human sexual relations. I find the whole idea rather grotesque."

>Can they dance?

"I have never tried, but I would imagine he knew how to waltz."

>What is your favourite drink?

"Snakes do not and cannot drink. When I am not a snake, I find that a glass of wine quells the considerable demands placed on me. If wine can't suffice, bourbon quells them faster. Possibly too fast. I make unwise decisions, inebriated."

>What is the food of your home culture?

"Bad coffee. Saline drips."

>What was the toughest lesson you had to learn the hard way, and what did it cost you?

"I cannot answer this. I apologize, but this is not something I can afford to tell you or anybody else. I can't have it leak back to Charlotte. If I must, I will tell you that it cost me everything I had in the world, but primarily myself."

>In the end, do you really think what we call "good" triumphs over 'evil'?"

"Those words are constructions invented for storybooks. There is no Law called [GOOD.] There is no Law called [EVIL.] The WYRM does not generate them, does not enforce them, does not, as far as I'm aware, have any opinion on them. If the haemic gods ever did, they are dead. But Charlie is insistent on them all the same, so I have formed an opinion of sorts. Which is: we are all Good. There is no Evil."

(Richard at this point lights a cigarette from a snake-shaped lighter.)

"You think that sounds provocative? No, I don't think so. I have yet to encounter anybody who acts in the belief that they're doing wrong. Stretched enough by the mind, all actions are justified. All are explainable. All are valid. What exists to countermand this? Not the WYRM. The WYRM does not weigh in on quibbles. Who else? You? Me? It's nonsense. For myself, I will fully admit that I treated Charlotte cruelly. I have been altered in such a way to make me see this, and I regret my actions, and I have resolved to treat her better in the future. Does this make me 'good?' Does it make the crueler Richard 'evil?' Of course not. I acted like that because I believed it was the best course of action. I act like this because I believe it's the best course of action. Is one way better? Is one worse? They could be. Not everything is equal; I don't mean to say so. But is one good and one evil? Do you live in a book with muscular men and busty young women and swords on the cover? You may; I don't know from what world you hail from. I do not."

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"I believe I may have stunned some of them into silence. I often have this effect on people. Still, if they are to ask questions of me, it is only right to ask questions of them. Here they are.

>What is your most embarrassing insecurity?

>What kind of manipulations are you weakest to? Strongest against?

>What is your relationship with your father like? (Or the person most equivalent to your father, if one exists.)

>What would you do if you were God? Or if you are a god, if your power was unlimited?

>What are the parts of a key?

I await the answers eagerly."

[QM Note: Richard goes on to respond to other characters responding to his questions.]

>EXCERPT FROM THE NOTES OF CORRESPONDENT #314, ETC.

"I have been approached by a belligerent pseudo-human woman. [QM note: Chaya, one of the other competitors, roleplayed by GrandDragonQM.] She seems threatened by the questions I've proposed, despite the fact that they're far less invasive than many of those already asked, and the fact that we are not directly competitors. I am reminded of Charlie.

Of course I responded politely..."

>You both think the same way, talk the same kind of circles around things instead of talking straight.

"I have been accused of this before. I can't say I understand it. I say what I mean to say, and I omit what isn't necessary. Is it actually the speech patterns you object to? If so, it's hardly my fault: it has been imposed on me by Charlotte. She has a very specific idea of how a well-bred individual should sound, though naturally she exempts herself from this."

>Well, if its about size, then it's definitely my chest.

"I see, though I don't understand. Wouldn't too large of a chest interfere with movement? Is it not 'unladylike?' (I quote Charlie.) I presume you're not currently nursing infants, so I confess I don't..."

>But pretending to be my friend was what worked best against me.

"Yes. I am familiar with this tactic. I'm afraid it's not as easy as it sounds."

>But we're a lot better now

"Really? I'm very pleased to hear that."

>Well, there's the part that opens the lock, and the part you hold onto to control the key to make it work.

"That's true— but there's actually nine parts of a key."

>Not like those trying to find some kind of edge against us like we're about to fight.

"Fight? No, no. I have no interest in fighting. As I mentioned, it's strictly prohibited."

>>5968717

>How many kids could you see yourself having?

"More children? I cannot reproduce in the way you do. If my... ah, I don't think there's a clean translation. One moment. ...If my 'genetic material' has been harvested and utilized, I would have no way of knowing this. If you're referring to children I already have, I have one. I do not want and could not handle any more."

>EXCERPT FROM THE NOTES OF CORRESPONDENT #314, ETC.

"What a surprise. I was pulled away for another infernal meeting— which (as always) could have been a memo— and when that was over with, I gave the idea of not returning serious contemplation. The odds did not appear to be in my favor. And imagine losing a position to automatons or mere animals: if it leaked, it would be the talk of the department. I am always the talk of the department; I have no desire to be moreso.

Unfortunately, it occurred to me that Charlotte was allegedly in the audience, that she was likely still in the audience, and that there was no guarantee whatsoever that she would be returned sane, intact, or at all. That did it. I had no particular need to win this peculiar competition, 'Crown' or no, but I did have a strong particular need to rescue Charlie from her bungling. Presumably it was her who landed us there to begin with.

I tuned it to deposit me at the same time I left, give or take a minute or two..."

>>5969043

>Huh, so kind of like that language filter Vox's got, translates me into other people's languages across the universe so they all understand me.

"In a sense, I suppose. I certainly don't have a native understanding of this language, though I have been practicing. It's very difficult to pronounce if one doesn't have the lips for it."

>"HA! You and Tanya would DEFINITELY get along!

"I don't doubt it, though I must warn you that I've been deemed 'difficult' to interact with. If she's intelligent, I wouldn't expect issues. It's only polite to use her preferred title— though I much prefer it when people don't use my title, myself."

>And someone stole those parts of you away. That's almost as bad as stealing somebody's free will, and using them like a puppet to do...terrible...things..."

"Yes. ...If it makes you feel any better, I'm sure it's happened many times before. I am a transient thing. I can't say I don't wish I wasn't."

>That was his final lesson, that we all have to die one day.

"All except the WYRM. Yes. This is truer than you know."

>We Saiyans are warriors, it isn't our place to die old and infirm in bed, no longer able to fight. We fight until our last breath.

"I believe Charlie feels similarly, though she's never said it. It's a respectable position. I am no warrior, but it's my dearest hope I am able to die bloodied."

>I don't really have any use for keys, I've never met a door I couldn't either tear open or kick down.

"Yes. You and Charlie truly do share an understanding. It might be useful to consider that just because you 'can,' doesn't mean you 'should.'"

>my sword is a sword that cuts things and summons an ancient spirit of its previous wielder

"Charlotte's sword is on fire. It's terribly unsubtle."

>*Don't try anything sneaky on my dad, it won't end well for you. It never worked for anyone who tried

"Thank you for your honest advice. I will refrain."

>"So, tell me more about this Charlotte. You seem to hold her in high regard, despite her changing your talking."

"...Yes." (Richard works his jaw.) "Yes. She is formally my client. It is my duty to guide her toward a higher state of being. This has been going... er... the situation is complex. She is not an easy person to guide. She is in fact rather chronically resistant to it. Very headstrong. If you tell her one thing, it is likely she'll do the precise opposite, and she'll think herself very smart for it. In this way we are not that different: I also chafe at the yoke."

"..."

"...What is the saying? 'A chip off the old block'?"

>And what is this WYRM? I've never heard that word before.

"It may mean nothing to you. It is everything to us. The WYRM birthed the world, bears it on Its back, and protects it from the seething void. It is our direct progenitor and our savior. But It is trapped under the earth, and It can do nothing. For now It can do nothing. Thank you for asking."

"I completed my conversation. The young woman did remind me greatly of Charlotte, despite clear physical differences, and I felt a pain speaking to her for too long. She had a knack for asking questions that hit to the gut. Thank goodness the results were announced, and she was eliminated: she could exit to the audience, find Charlotte, and they could discuss hitting objects with sticks. I would then of course have to convince Charlotte that she could not visit the woman's dimension, or vice versa, but that would be a problem for a future self. If she could be pacified in the moment, it was worthwhile.

In the meantime, I found watching the voting process distasteful: it brought up too many urges to interfere. I had to remind myself that meddling could prove consequential. It was damn devious to separate myself and Charlotte: in combination we would be too difficult to stop. It was a good thing that others had already begun to engage with the questions I proposed..."

>>5973126

>"W-what? I'm not insecure! Who told you I was insecure??"

[In notes] "An ambiguous youth of some type, likely weak-minded. Similar to Gil. Should not present any issue."

>"As if I'd tell you that! Who do you work for—the Dragon King? The Dark Gods? Who sent you?!"

[In notes] "Jumps to conclusions." [Aloud] "I am an agent of the Satellite Branch. I do not answer to forces from your dimension, and I have little idea why I would. The WYRM is a dark god in that it lives in the dark; it is not dark as a term of judgment, as you use it, or in color. I am not an agent of It. This is a popular misconception."

>I didn't know Rudolfo—my father—until I was almost an adult, and I wasn't overly impressed by what I saw on our first meeting.

[Aloud.] "It is difficult to be a father. I'm certain he would've preferred to raise you, had he the chance."

>"Maybe I should visit him soon..."

[Aloud.] "I'm sure he would appreciate this."

>"I've been given a lot of reason to think about that lately, unfortunately. Even in smaller doses, that kind of power over nature itself—over people—feels like too much.

[In notes] "Unambitious. No personal fire." [Aloud.] "Charlie once felt the same. She may still. I, myself, am not in any position to become God."

>If you CAN do something to make the world a better place, you SHOULD... Right?

[In notes] "Naïve." [Aloud.] "If it would cause yourself no personal trouble, I suppose so."

>"The metal—or material—the shape, the animating force, and the attunement to the lock."

[Aloud.] "This is a good answer. You sell yourself short." [In notes.] "The youth is communicating with an invisible presence. I am not able to see their strings here; I do not know what. It is terribly unlikely they have an agent, and they do not seem mentally unwell. Could they be in tune with what brought us here? I should tread carefully."

>>[5973251](#)

[In notes.] "Physically intimidating, but not immediately aggressive." [Aloud.] "Ah, the father. How delightful. We have at least one thing in common."

> If I'm a good enough father to my children. If I have done enough, taught them how to go out and live on their own.

[Aloud.] "I assure you, these are common worries for all fathers. It is my life's duty— life's challenge, really—to push Charlotte out of the proverbial nest. I dislike hovering over her as much as she dislikes me doing it."

>"I killed my father, at his request. Next."

Richard smiles ruefully but says nothing.

>"A key? Dunno, never bother with them. I haven't met a door I couldn't knock down, that or the wall it is connected to."

[Aloud.] "Your daughter takes after you. I hope this shared strategy has served you both well."

>"Unlimited power? Well, I'd make it so no one could attack my home ever again. Be they mortal or god, or anything else."

[Aloud.] "A sound idea, nobly intentioned. Would you kill them, or merely obstruct their passage?"

[In notes.] "This man is not ill-natured, which is fortunate, as I've been repeatedly warned he could tear me to shreds. If the competition is kept friendly, there should be no concern. If things escalate... I should locate Charlotte as quickly as possible. It would be wise to plan an exit."

—

"There are more responses. These people are eager to bare their inmost selves to me. Isn't it amazing what a listening ear can produce? Too many for now. I will report again later, in the order they were given."

>EXCERPT FROM THE NOTES OF CORRESPONDENT #314, ETC.

"I have grown better at ascertaining ages from human faces, but this one needed little interpretation. I am almost certain that it is a human child [QM Note: *Elliot Hallister, one of the competitors, written by Hogwarts QM*]. Is that permissible? Where are its guardians? It is a bold little thing, answering my questions. I had thought I would repel children. Charlotte excluded, of course."

>I am terrified of ice-skates for one thing.

[In notes.] "Ice.. skates..."

>I will get my 140, 160 years and never accomplish anything.

[Aloud.] "That is nearly twice the average lifespan of the average human. Is it not enough?" [In notes.] "Despite appearances, child unlikely to be completely human. Keep eye on."

>If... I cant fix it, in 100 years could I even recall my parents reading me stories as a boy or the first date with the girl I love?

[In notes.] "Predictably innocent." [Aloud.] "Almost certainly not. The human mind is deeply fallible. I suggest you make your peace with it now, so you will be untroubled in the many years ahead."

>Intimidation is useless though. I have fought people far above my weight class for most of my life; I was scared but I never backed down.

[In notes.] "This explains why it came up to me. An attitude like this is likely to get it killed in short order, presuming there's nobody to keep it on a leash."

>Me and Dad get along famously. I bore him with History of Magic trivia, he bores me with History of Anything Else trivia

[Aloud.] "I'm pleased you have a good relationship. I'm afraid Charlotte has no interest in trivia of any kind, no matter how interesting or pertinent. It goes through her like a sieve, if you would believe it." [In notes.] "History of magic? The child does not appear haemic. There are no track marks. I fear he means 'magic' how Charlotte means 'magic'— only to him it is not fictional. Charlotte must never hear of this."

>Oh Merlin! I am turning into my dad! Arty, help, having an existential crisis here!

"I'm afraid this happens to everybody. It is no less existential for the father, I assure you. You may understand if you ever have children of your own."

> That much power in one person? The ego to go with it?

"Yes. If it helps you, know that an ego of that nature faces difficulty becoming God to begin with. They are prone to idiocy and self-sabotage. For all Charlotte is difficult, I have at least managed to keep her contained."

>I would try to make people more free, to be able to live their best lives.

"I seek freedom for all as well. You don't quite realize what you've been missing until you taste the alternative."

>Anything can be a "key".

"A key is anything that opens a lock. A lock is anything opened by a key. The WYRM eats itself, does it not? Such is tautology."

>The only part of a key which matters is the hand turning it. Are they locking something in or out. Is that hand opening the door or shutting it behind them?

[In notes.] "This child is a deep thinker, or an overthinker. If I asked Charlotte, I believe she'd answer 'the key part.' Or possibly 'the part that goes in the lock, and the part you hold onto.'"

>FURTHER EXCERPT

[QM Note: DefectQM wrote his character Mark DeLucia, of Gotham Beat Cop Quest, as having dreamed of Richard asking him questions. Mark has the equivalent of the "Shivers" skill from Disco Elysium.]

"An unusual finding: my mere presence was enough to lull a human man into a hypnotic stupor. It was as if I'd interfered with his mind— only, I must assure you, I did nothing of the sort. I merely noted him 'nodding off,' though I sensed something amiss, and a brief foray under his surface revealed a vision of an interrogation chamber. He perceived himself as locked inside of it, and my optional questions as mandatory directives. Again, something I might do— but something I had not done! I suspect he is metaphysically sensitive, whether he is aware or not. Perhaps highly suggestable as well. As my curiosity was piqued, I took the liberty to listen in on his responses...

>If I have to answer I guess I would say how I act when tapped into Shivers. I got told I was "zombified" just kinda shambling around, actually ended up suspended for a bit due to some mishaps with evidence.

[In notes.] "Unclear what 'shivers' pertains to— a wellspring of metaphysical power? 'Zombified' is not in the lexicon, but I imagine it puts him into a deep trance."

>I'm a hard guy to get the drop on, if we're on my home field then nobody is getting anything past me without a whisper in my ear.

[In notes.] "Deeply fortunate we are not on his 'home field.' Still, intriguing. Is he sensitive to tremors ('shivers') in the strings of the environment? That would neatly explain it. A bolder hypothesis: he could be twisted up in them. Imagine the implications!"

>I love my pop

[In notes.] "Many good fathers. Or dead ones."

> I guess I would just do my best to never lose perspective, to always try and lend a hand to the little guy and not get lost in the 'big picture' like some others.

[In notes.] "He would make a good client."

>"If you're asking mechanically uh I guess metal?

[In notes.] "Initial answer incorrect. Slow-witted?"

>. A key opens a lock, therefore the parts of a key are whatever that lock requires, less of course you're a skeleton key.

[In notes.] "A better second attempt. It strikes close to the truth of the matter. And isn't a key made to fit a lock, not vice versa? A key requires a lock; a lock does not require a key. In retrospect, foolish to be a key. But I have no choice."

>You lean back in your seat and stare at the only other object in this room. An antique lighter coated with decorative snakes.

[In notes.] "_Highly_ sensitive."

>You blink again and open your eyes to the familiar sight of your bedroom ceiling, you sit up in bed rubbing your nape.

[In notes.] "His vision shifted to that of his bedroom. This is one interpretation: that he is unaware of his true location, and is dwelling in dream to cope. A scenario like this would rattle the worldview of a [largely] typical human, barring large discrepancies between dimensions. The other interpretation is: he truly is inside his bedroom, and the body entered into the tournament is a mere placeholder. A shell— a doppelganger. Did the force fail to bring all of him along? Were negotiations made? There is much to learn here."

>EXCERPT FROM THE NOTES OF CORRESPONDENT #314, ETC.

"Another! Another degenerated form— this one a lizard-girl! [*QM note: a kobold from Spinejuice's Kobolt Klan Adoption Quest*], even smaller and shorter-necked than the other. I shouldn't stumble over myself: it could be that a body-plan like this is separately, coincidentally popular. The probability of relation is not high. But imagine if there were relation! If the WYRM's influence spans that far! But no, again, one shouldn't range too freely. The lizard-girl's voice and inflection, after all, was uniquely irritating. Would one *want* to be relatives with such a tiny thing?

Still, the tidbits it shared were of great interest.

>Oh, and I guess if you'd ask him, he'd probably say something like, the fact he's turning into a great, powerful and beautiful dragon and how it might cast him away from humanity, as if *they* matter.

[In notes.] "A 'dragon'. Not a pre-installed term. Some digging revealed the general meaning: a powerful, intelligent, monstrous reptile. That this human man was turning into. Maybe there is such a thing as a Script."

[Aloud.] "What is the nature of this 'turning into a dragon'? I presume you mean physically? What changes have already occurred? Who is perpetrating this?"

>Hehe! He killed his stupid worthless father!

[In notes.] "If there is a Script, it is a comedy. (And I am the butt of the joke.)"

>Because he was worshipping the monstrosities that usually hide and try to heal in the darkest of dungeons, faaaaar to the west! Demon worshippers, and worshippers of the Heart of the World, seeking to burst from this planet like an egg when it finishes gestating.

[In notes.] "This could be an elaborate hallucination."

[Aloud.] "Would that be such a bad thing, this bursting like an egg? What has this Heart of the World promised? This father must have worshipped it for some reason."

>Pppssshhhh... He's kiiiiinda already there, right?

[In notes.] "Already a God— yes. There is no alternative."

>Power doesn't corrupt! It just reveals.

"I prefer to think it 'intoxicates.' It cannot put urges into you— but it certainly can draw them out, no matter your desire otherwise."

>Handle, rod and, uh, the teathy bit. I never learned the name of that.

"The teathy bit are the "cuts," the "bits," or the "teeth." You were two-thirds of the way there."

>Power. Power applied with either great amounts of it, or very precise amounts of power, which is just a multiplier.

[In notes.] "There is more brain in that tiny skull than it would appear."

>Oh, and I'm guessing the dragon's mate, Paracelsus, might take some time out to judge the other contestants.

"I look forward to it. Is she a reptile?"

>>5975041

"I keep finding my attention drawn to a being in the corner, made of pure white light— and, I am certain, pure Law. (I cannot see it in this place, but I can feel the vibrations.) Another place's God? [QM note: *the goddess Music from Versequest.*] Assuredly a minor one, or we would all be vapor. It has been silent until now, but its gaze is now directed on me, and its 'mouth' has opened. Imagine my surprise when, instead of comprehensible speech, out came the velvety tones of a chamber orchestra!

Was this its means of communication, or was it merely providing accompaniment to the room's chatter? I confess I have little knowledge of music, but I found it rather pleasant. Though, to close the performance with an ascending series of notes, with no resolution— a bold choice.

I do think it was merely accompaniment, as any God ought to be able to project words into the minds of onlookers. The WYRM is not one for vivid discourse, but this is a noted feature. I will say I did applaud—so let Charlie say I have no social graces. (I have more when I am not cooped up all day and night. Imagine that.)"

>>5975406

"I was confronted next by a machine— yes, a machine, but one apparently capable of independent thought. [QM note: *Beta from CoreQM's Core of Steel quest.*] If R&D caught wind of this, there would be committees and subcommittees and sub-subcommittees organized within the hour. An improvement over existing chassis? I can't see how. As bad or worse, with the exception of the possible restoration of fingers. And how would the WYRM take it? Are we all to be rendered mechanical? I must consider cleaning this information from myself as I depart.

The machine took issue with my proclamation of ethics, and dispensed a sob story to support itself (all while claiming it was not, in fact, a sob story). Truthfully, the subject matter made me uncomfortable. I could not tell it why. I could hardly tell myself why. What a twisted parody I have become!

I believe my response was something like this:

>As a machine enslaved to my creators, I am physically incapable of disobeying orders.

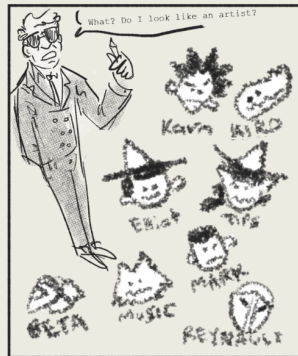
"Of course. Shall I amend my statement? I have never met anybody who has acted, of their own volition, in the belief they are doing wrong. If there is no free will, there is no good or evil at all. There is nothing."

I could not vocalize the next logical step, which I had already come to: under free will, all actions are good. To take away free will was then necessarily evil. Enough! My mind has been made to run in straight lines too long. I do not like machines."

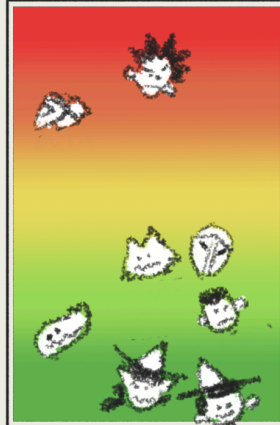
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"I have drawn up a preliminary assessment of those I have spoken to (who are also still competing). Subject to change, of course— but it is good to be prepared early."

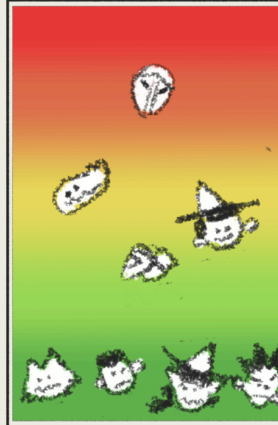
Richard's
King & Queen Tourney
Threat Assessment Chart
(Preliminary, incomplete)



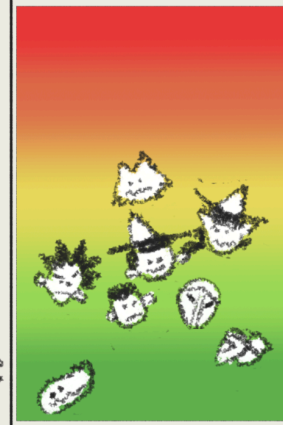
PHYSICAL



EMOTIONAL



METAPHYSICAL



[Tips from ReptoidQM's Seekers of the Esoteric attempts to connect Richard with his own setting's underground reptilian spies and cultists]

>>5976104

>The Prince of Bloodrise was called a 'wurm', too...

"How interesting. I wouldn't imagine they're the same, though. The WYRM would never stoop to the pettiness of rulership."

>I'm not sure what you mean by 'dimensions', but it SOUNDS like the Hellish Realms or the hidden places where the Dark Ones dwell to me.

"A hellish realm, yes. Hah. In a way it is that. A hidden place, too. Do you not think 'dark ones' is terribly offensive?"

>Are you from the same place as that 'Skyeskal' fellow?

"I wouldn't know. Why would you think so?"

[In notes] "Myopic. Relates all experiences to their limited own. What is their understanding of this "tournament"? Where do they think they are? Hypothesis: my hyper-awareness of the situation is unusual; most perceive this as fitting within their own worldview— psychological protection? [Note lack of distress/urgency among 'competitors'] Or are they (like the human man) still literally within their own dimensions? A mix? As ever, further monitoring required.

>>5978823

[Richard responds to Tips' response.]

>And isn't that what they call themselves? [QM note: 'Dark Ones']

"How primitive. Unless it's ironic?"

>You're both... Reptilian, aren't you?

"...Is it so obvious?"

[In notes] "Physical separation from Charlotte limits her influence (though she must be here somewhere, or I would not be). I confess I do not spot the tell. The voice? The posture? My teeth are square. Does the youth possess enhanced senses? (...Or does its accompanying agent?)

>But not the sort I'm familiar with, from some other place... Another world, by the sounds of it

"I would imagine so, yes."

[In notes]: "Finally: understanding."

>and APPARENTLY unfamiliar with dragons, kobolds, and Dark Gods, which all normally go hand-in-hand with, uh, your 'kind'?"

"Based on this sample alone, it'd appear that intelligent reptiles are a widespread concept. I would additionally posit that my 'kind' is further along than your 'kind,' or indeed than the other ones present—though the little male one had a type of gun I didn't recognize, so who's to say? I suppose there are many 'kinds.' May you take this tournament as a learning experience, yes? Good day."



[The boy wizard Elliot Hallister from *Disappearing Hogwarts Quest* says:]

>We will be sure to tell Miss Charlotte that no, magic most definitively is not real and practiced by a small but significant portion of society. If we ever meet her.

"That would make my life much easier. I greatly appreciate your discretion."

>>5980029

[The Narrator from Cutemon Quest attempts to speak to Richard. Richard is metaphysically sensitive to 4th wall breaks and doesn't take it well.]

>EXCERPT FROM RICHARD'S (NOW RATHER LENGTHY) NOTES

"...was when I had completed that conversation, and when that little girl began glowing yellow — it was then that the 'voice' came, and the sensation. The voice was not the girl's voice, but it was of her, belonged to her— or her of it? The 'narrator.' It said as much. I hoped this was a frivolous designation: that there were Narrators as there were Correspondents, or that there were Narrators as there were Seas and WYRMs, and that the power here was within my comprehension. I was no stranger to voices in the heads of children, and through Charlie I had already seen God. But the sensation— I am still sweating. It was just on the cusp of my understanding. Perched there. I grasped for it and felt — a void — a flatness — a division, a very thin division, with myself on one side and the voice on the other, though I could not tell if it was a voice or words, all words, that I was reading, or that were being read on my behalf. I was not being invaded, not dissected, but observed — my notes and myself, held to the division, and the thing on the other side! What saved me from madness was firstly, the thought of Charlotte, and secondly, that the 'voice' was kind, and it liked me. I believe I was wished good luck. I believe I was instructed to not be distressed. Yes — to not be distressed.

I did not know how to respond then, but I am certain this is being read. So: thank you for the benevolence. I believe I will (I must) support this child in her competitive endeavors. And I believe I will see if this place serves wine."



[The tournament begins properly. First up for Richard: paddleboarding vs. Tom from Weaver's Rubyquest.]

>EXCERPT FROM THE NOTES OF CORRESPONDENT #314, ETC.

"It was time. How much time? There were no clocks. My wristwatch was missing. Subjectively, it was minutes since my last entry. But the females were gone— spirited off to their own competition, once and for all— and more objective measures suggested a month and a half in r-time. A month and a half! At least I was well-preserved. They had taken the time to create likenesses of us— I thought mine was rather good, if simplistic, and made with limited information about my appearance. Much better limited information than too much.

But I digress. Before I was aware of much of anything, they had me and a creature— some manner of two-legged feline— out on the ocean. Not our ocean. Inert water. I was delivered a floating oval and a paddle and was instructed to paddle myself along a course. The fastest would win. (Not that my trials would be over after that, but it was a start.)

I had never heard of such of an activity, and frankly I could not grasp why anybody would do such a thing willingly, but out of everything on offer I'm sure it could have been worse. This "stand-up paddleboarding" took more balance than it did raw athleticism. Moreover, the organizers, such as they were, provided next to no instructions. "Get there faster." They did not say I had to be fast. It did indicate that the feline had to be slower than me, which could be easily accomplished if, e.g., a wayward snake were to accidentally wrap itself around the feline's paddle, throwing him off balance. It would be even more helpful if the snake, understandably angered from furious attempts to beat it off the paddle, were to bite the feline on his exposed toes, sending him flailing off entirely. If this were the case, I could take my time, enjoy a cigarette, and consider this an opportunity to learn something new."

>Richard (Drowned Quest Redux)



"Taming a child is near exactly like taming an animal. Moreso if the child is, in fact, a type of animal. The other one— his mate might be skilled at it, but it's not her contest, is it? She was disqualified. I saw it happen."

>Sir Reynauld of House Numitor (Kobolt Klan Adoption)

[Richard wins the paddleboarding and faces off against Karn from Saiyan Conqueror Quest in the realm of Magic: the Gathering.]

>EXCERPT FROM THE NOTES OF CORRESPONDENT #314, AKA "RICHARD", ETC.

"I won the 'paddleboard' contest, naturally. The feline proved inferior in the face of unexpected circumstances, and I enjoyed some leisure time. I had not doubted my competence, of course, but it did solidify that I might have an easier time than anticipated. Hopefully Charlie was here to watch it.

Almost as soon as it was completed, the next round was thrust upon me. This time, my opponent was the man with the obscene hair— the father of the Charlie-like woman I had spoken to previously. Speaking forthrightly, I could not win any physical contest with him, and I had been warned that trickery was off the table. I found it exceedingly fortunate, then, that the round was centered on pure strategy. A card game.

I had never played this 'Magic the Gathering' before, but I swiftly learned that 'Karn' had not either (though allegedly he had fought some of the monsters the cards depicted, an experience I did not find applicable). I was wary of the title, but could not find true haemic influence in the game. It was fictional. Better 'Magyck the Gathering,' then.

With that resolved, I found a liking in the card game. Deceptively straightforward, it masked a wealth of strategy I fear my opponent is not well-suited to grasp (no matter how much his daughter might attempt to explain). I would not cheat, of course. I was warned. But I found that all manner of chicanery was possible within the letter of the tournament rules. He would attempt to win through raw power, as anticipated— but how well would raw power hold up if my opponent were unable to play his cards at all? If he were to sit there, waiting patiently, then less patiently, as my own cards activated infinitely? We would find out. But I think I knew the answer."

>Richard (Drowned Quest Redux)

"A noble knight versus a lowborn officer. It should be a clear advantage. But if I've learned anything from Charlie, nobility is no mark of refinement."

>Rolling for vote:

1 = Mark

2 = Reynauld

>>6023445

[Richard receives fanart from SirenQM of Mutant!Quest.]



"As the game was about to begin, I was presented with a sheet of paper. On it, an audience member had drawn myself (my body) in a compromising position. I was remarkably hairy, though I suppose most mammals are.

I did not know how to feel. I suppose I have an admirer. I would hope they would admire me more for my unique talents than for my physical form, however."

[Richard receives further fanart.]



>EXCERPT FROM THE NOTES OF CORRESPONDENT #314, AKA "RICHARD", ETC.

"..."



[Spinejuice roleplays his MC Sir Reynauld as being bitchy toward Richard. Richard is predictably bitchy back.]

>EXCERPT FROM THE NOTES OF CORRESPONDENT #314, AKA "RICHARD", ETC.

"In the short break in between the second and third matches, it came to my attention that the competitors in our sister challenge— the "charity fundraiser," which I also believe I would have done quite well in— had been released to submit their own votes. In particular, the knight was casting his. I chanced to overhear his phrasing, though of course I had placed myself nearby.

'All the same, I'll take a guess that the general has a better strategic eye than the...'

He looked directly at me (a notable downside of placing myself nearby), appeared to not like what he saw, and said the next word with more contempt than I thought I'd warranted. I had not exchanged two words with him.

'...creature. Best of luck to the General.'

I do admit it raised my hackles— less the "creature," which was laughably incorrect and unworthy of acknowledgement, and more the idea that Karn had any natural advantage. The playing field had been evened by a lack of knowledge, not of skill: were we both handed a memstick of every "Magyck the Gathering" card in existence, I would wipe the floor with the man ninety-nine times of every hundred. Me, the lesser strategic eye! I had more of a mind for this than the department put together. I was indispensable. Was Karn indispensable, or did he paper over his deficiencies with a jovial attitude? More importantly, was the knight indispensable, or was he a craven know-nothing who couldn't tell his face from his scaly ass?

I had planned to remain civil. It wasn't productive to make enemies of strangers, particularly those in direct competition. But for all my good behavior, for no apparent reason, this man was keen on making an enemy of me. If he was so committed, I would play my part. I had seen his so-called curse: I knew the WYRM had taken hold of him. He was not (could not be) the Herald, so he will be deemed imperfect, then be left in indescribable suffering for the rest of his short, hubristic life. I will take pleasure in detailed imaginings of this scenario. In the meantime, the knight will receive my smile, and when we meet, he will receive my teeth. May the WYRM claim him sooner versus later.

And in the meantime, I will rescind my vote. I hope he's proud of himself."

Retracting [>>6023463](#): *[The coin flip had landed on Reynauld]*

>Officer Mark DeLucia (Gotham City Beat Cop Quest)

[Richard loses the coinflip for the winner of the MTG round. Karn, his opponent, graciously extends the offer of another match.]

>EXCERPT FROM THE NOTES OF CORRESPONDENT #314, AKA "RICHARD", ETC.

"It was poor luck. Always the flaw in any plan: poor luck. Strategize as much as you like, play as well as you're able, be smarter, be better, be more— and there is nothing you can do if the cards don't fall in your favor. You would think that once is enough to learn this lesson, but once, twice, ten, fifty times are not enough. It's never enough. Each time cuts as deep as the last.

If Charlie is watching, she will take the wrong lesson from this. She will tell me that I lost because I was bad. This is how she thinks. To her, the good wins and the bad loses, and she is good, so she wins. She will never accept, never admit, how much she benefits from accidents of chance— and how much chance rips from me.

Karn was civil. It was hot coffee on a burnt tongue, insult to injury: I could accept a loss to an enemy, who could receive commensurate suffering at a later date, but to him? I thought recreationally of flaying him with his own Banefire, but could not sustain it for long. It wouldn't be practical, on top of unjustified, and Karn after all had acknowledged my only deficit: luck, luck, luck. It deserved to be a four-letter word. In a Best of Five, I would be *proven* superior.

'Yes,' I said. 'Thank you. I would be delighted.'"

[The coinflip rules are adjusted so that Richard ties with Karn. He competes in a beekeeping contest versus Diesel Crash from BonesQM's Slice Quest.]

>EXCERPT FROM THE NOTES OF CORRESPONDENT #314, AKA "RICHARD", ETC.

"I emerged victorious in the full game, as anticipated. What's more, the rules were adjusted: Karn and I would be deemed, officially speaking, 'tied.' I may have been too hasty in my foul mood: my parting handshake was genuine, and I hope it was taken as such."

—

"Karn set off to drain a bottle of 'hot sauce,' and evidently emerged victorious. By all accounts it was well-earned. Myself, I was presented with a hive of, per the announcement, 'giant, supernatural honey-hornets from the pain dimension.' I don't believe the 'pain dimension' is an actual place, so I presume this is hyperbole; nevertheless, this is not my body, and any pain it might feel is not my pain. I do not believe the 'honey hornets' would find flesh to pierce to begin with. If they can, I can expel their venom. All of this presupposes I would anger them to begin with, but I believe Apoidea are, like many insects (the common beetle included) adversely affected by nicotine smoke, which I possess in spades. I

should be able to walk in and walk out. My competitor, an ordinary and not especially bright human male, almost does not bear commenting on."

>Richard (Drowned Quest Redux)



—

"Both wield Charlotte's favorite 'magyck,' but one knows what pinball is, and one does not, no? Should that not be an obvious advantage?"

>Elliot Hallaster (Disappearing Hogwarts)



[Richard loses at Zumba...]

[...and must next compete in... Turkish oil wrestling... vs. Kiro, the space lizard from Chartman's Voidship Bridge Simulator Quest.]

>EXCERPT FROM THE NOTES OF CORRESPONDENT #314, AKA "RICHARD", ETC.

"The less said about the previous activity, the better. If Charlotte was truly in the audience, I trust that my attire made her avert her eyes, and therefore she escaped witness of my performance. An idiotic name for an idiotic pastime for idiots, my opponent no exception.

My streak of disadvantages was to continue: obviously I had been singled out for humiliation and destruction. 'The tall poppy gets the scythe'— always and forever. Perhaps I would make the competition uninteresting to watch, were I dealt with fairly. No matter.

'Oil wrestling.' On the upside, this involved less jostling than the hateful 'Zumba,' and rather more endurance. Per my research, matches could last upwards of an hour, provided no competitor was successfully pinned. My opponent in this case was the small lizard, the distant relative. I had no experience with his tail, or with his diminutive stature, but I recognized his body plan— and knew it was not impervious to a well-placed thumb or knee. Moreover, I knew his energy and good cheer was not infinite. He would squirm— but so would I, and only one of us would tire. Additionally, he lacked the strength to flip me over— but I did not lack the strength to flip him. It didn't matter whether it took 1 hour, or 3, or 5. I would inevitably prevail."

>Richard (Drowned Quest Redux)



[Fanart from BananasQM.]



[The other round was pumpkin carving.]

"Is this not a popular pastime for children?"

>Elliot Hallaster (Disappearing Hogwarts)

[Richard ties at oil wrestling. Next up: running a lemonade stand.]

>EXCERPT FROM THE NOTES OF CORRESPONDENT #314, AKA "RICHARD", ETC.

"How was I to know the organizers had instituted a time limit? Were we informed? Of course not. The child was too squirmy to pin, and I too slippery, and our combined energies were not yet spent when time was called. Thus the wrestling was declared a draw, though I undoubtedly would have won if the fight were administered properly.

Next was— next was that vile, impudent man, and his WYRM-curse. I really did not need to win here, as, in the long term, victory over his feeble, puttylike flesh was inevitable. He would be a tool whether he liked it or not. However, I admit that I would take enormous satisfaction if I **were** to win here, if only to speed up his process of realization.

Fortuitously, this contest was not physical: perhaps the powers-that-be had grown tired of watching my fumbling. Rather, we were to sell a sour beverage: "lemonade." I don't know that I had ever tasted it, though I believed Charlotte was fond of it. Damn it! If only she were here! She was not a persuasive saleswoman— the opposite, in fact— but the purchase of this lemonade appeared to be driven by pity more than a genuine desire, and she was excellent at nothing else if invoking pity. It was something in her eyes. That, and no matter the outcome of the sales, she would be there: buoying me upon success, cushioning me from failure. Her absence pained me, and not just from worry. I felt I needed her.

If I had seen the words I am writing at any previous point— **any** previous point— within the cycle, I would have been horrified. I am beyond rescue. I know I am beyond rescue. I know I am beyond the Task. I know this because none of it matters to me anymore— or the amount it matters pales in the face of what newly matters. I—

I am getting off topic. Charlotte was not here, so I would sell the lemonade, a task I was well-suited for. I knew the mechanics of sales, and the micro-fluctuations in a tone of voice that drives them. If I was asked where my child was, I would say that she was briefly absent. It was true. And if she could not invoke pity, a plea toward charity surely would. Proceeds to go to saving the world.

If this strategy were to fail, I had dozens more. If necessary, I'm sure that man's lemonade could be made to taste vile, to sicken and poison, and mine could be enhanced in various ways. Purchase a lemonade and become a God! No. Best to win on my own terms first, so my superiority would be unimpeachable. But if that failed, alternatives could be pursued. How could I fail?"

>Richard (Drowned Quest Redux)



—
"I admit, I had my doubts about whether the creature was capable of baking. The evidence, however, speaks for itself."

>Ramster (Cutémon)

[Richard narrowly wins at lemonade selling, wins at underwater welding, and ties at doing impressions.]

>EXCERPT FROM THE NOTES OF CORRESPONDENT #314, AKA "RICHARD", ETC.

"My lemonade venture began rockily— I was informed some of the voting public found my presence 'creepy,' a criticism I did not understand— but improved when I took a page from Charlotte's book and adulterated my lemonade with alcohol. As far as I understand it, this altered my perceived clientele from children to adults, who have greater freedom and spending power. I should have thought of this to begin with.

I began by adding a quantity of flavorless liquor to the lemonade, which was successful enough, but my sales skyrocketed when I pulled out the bourbon. Though originally intended to fuel my own sales efforts, I was notified that the combination of bourbon and lemonade made the delicious 'whiskey sour,' which I could produce in large quantities. It was no less than a revelation. I won cleanly after that."

-

>>6041842

"Were the organizers now inebriated? It would explain the next 'challenge'— yes, that is 'challenge' in scare quotes. Underwater welding, pitted against the tiny creature. Laughable. I was no expert in welding, but I needed no equipment for the water, and thanks to Charlotte I had full-scale limbs and thumbs— plus, I found the venture pleasurable, even meditative. None of these were true for the creature: I could have welded a battleship in the time it took for it to weld a single metal plate. It was so small, so eager, so pathetically out-of-its-depth, that I admit it stirred something in me. Not enough to enable its win, of course. I am not so beyond repair. But after I completed my assignment, I did assist it with some particularly difficult-to-reach places. May she never call me heartless again."

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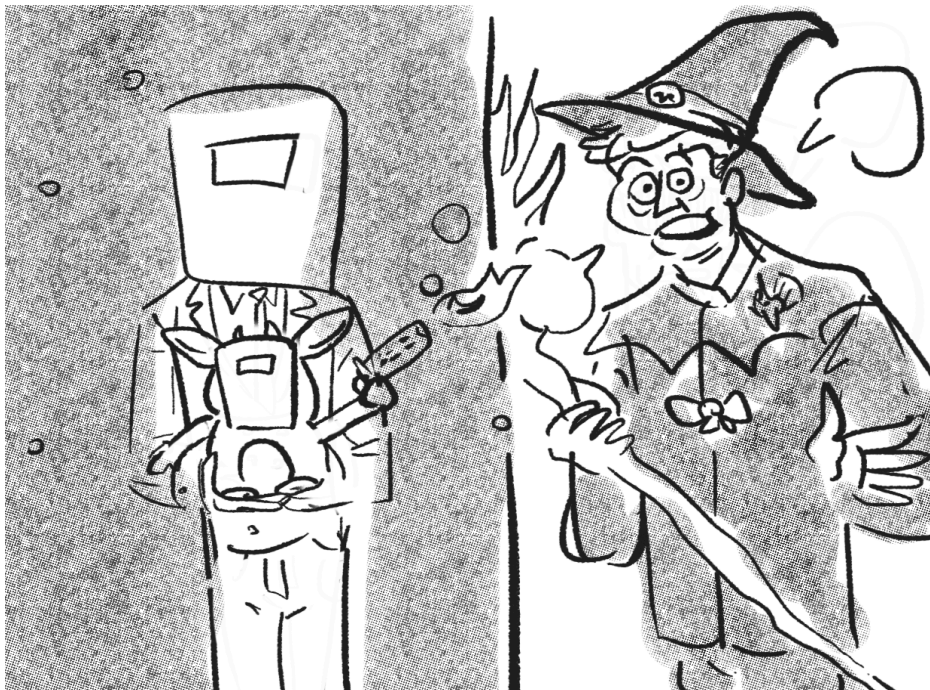
>>6040284

"Impressions. The imitation of another's face, voice, and mannerisms. I was deemed an underdog in this fight, which means there's parts of myself the powers-that-be cannot see. Good. They are unaware that my face and mannerisms belong to one man, and my voice belongs to another. They are unaware I am a

walking impression. A parody. With comedy, you portray yourself, and nothing is more difficult. With impressions, you portray anybody else, and nothing is more simple.

There is almost nothing inherent to a snake. All they have is what they take: from the world, and from their prey. I would not eat the youth's voice— a disqualification— but I would swallow it and spit it from my own lips. I would not take his face— mine was wedded to me, or welded— but my garments had no such restriction. I would study his gormless naivete and mimic that too. His impression of me was game. My impression of him was flawless.

In the end we tied. Evidently I was not 'funny' enough."



>EXCERPT FROM THE NOTES OF CORRESPONDENT #314, AKA "RICHARD", ETC.

[Richard loses in the batting cage against the AI mech Beta.]

>>6044303

"Another stroke of ill fortune— or another attempt at sabotage. Who could possibly expect me to compete against a machine at hitting a speeding ball? I admit I envied its size, its power, its precision: I have known these things only briefly, and only under contract, but even then they were intoxicating. I must keep in mind the drawbacks. The machine may run its calculations, pursue its efficiencies, hit its balls as hard as it likes, but those things are not all that matters. They are hardly a fraction of all that matters.

I do hope Charlotte is safe."

>>6046557

[Richard narrowly wins at cup stacking against James Calaca from Gaol Quest.]

"Me against the man with the unusual eye. Not the WYRM's eye, fortunately, and it was not a test of vision. I admit I took more pleasure than was warranted at the challenge at hand: I care a great deal about the structure of things. Maybe I cared a tad too much, because the end result was closer than I would have liked. Still, it was another victory, and that is nothing to scoff at."

[Richard is tied with Beta for most # of wins. They enter a runoff based on raw popularity.]

>>6047951

"At last: I had come to the end. As I always anticipated, I had outmatched every opponent. Nearly every opponent. The debacle with the batting cage, as it turned out, had put me neck and neck with one final competitor: the machine. Was I to outmaneuver it? Gum up its works? No. The only criteria at this final stage: simple popularity. The audience would vote for who they liked most.

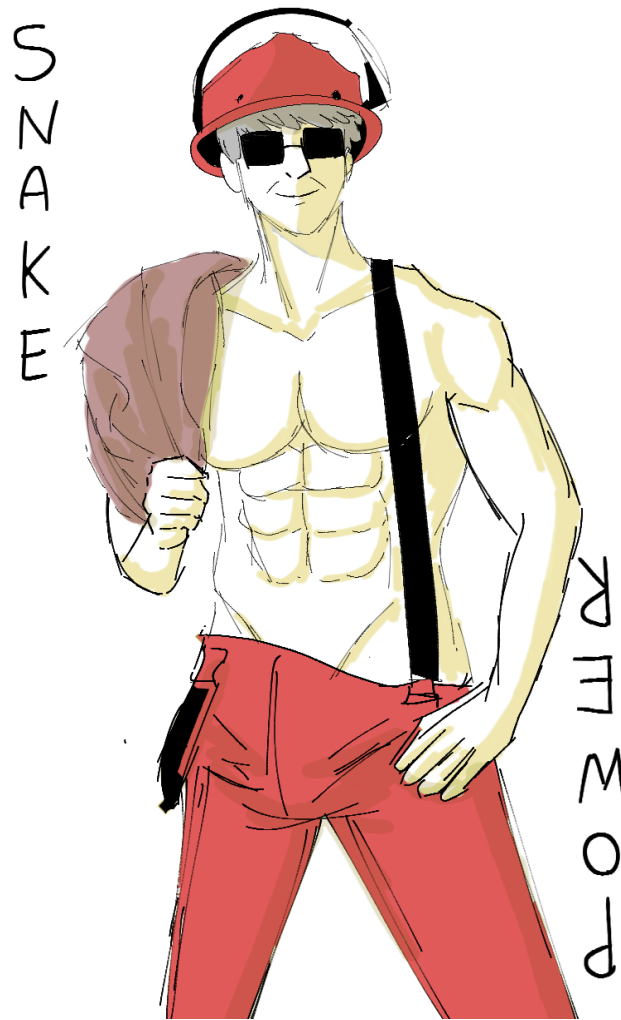
I am excellent, even superior, at many things. But at this...

We will see what comes of it."

>Richard (Drowned Quest Redux)

[SirenQM unleashes his final gambit.]

[illegible]



>>6048047

"I give thanks to the WYRM that I do not exist within the mind of this troubled individual. However bad my circumstances are, they can always be worse."



[Richard loses the popularity contest, the only possible canon-appropriate outcome!]

**>THE FINAL EXCERPT FROM THE DILIGENT NOTE-TAKING OF CORRESPONDENT #314,
UNOFFICIALLY AND QUESTIONABLY KNOWN AS "RICHARD," AFTER HIS ENTRANCE INTO AN
INTERDIMENSIONAL "HUSBANDO TOURNAMENT"**

"I lost.

"Perhaps it was expected. Perhaps I should have expected it. Perhaps I even did. But it's rarely productive and never wise to dwell on idle doubting, not when matters are still at hand. I lost— and the final count wasn't close— not that it ever would have been. A popularity contest! I fail to see how the machine had much charm, but I could lose a popularity contest to a mound of dirt. Talent does not win you friends or admirers: it wins you jealous schemes, betrayals, flatterers, and foes. Step a toe out of established doctrine (doctrine based on nothing, which has never accomplished anything) and they— all of them, the small-minded, those little people in their little cubes with their perfect little BW-stamped doomed-to-fail clients— will band together, sensing a threat to their comfortable ineffectuality, their inefficient dithering, and tear you to pieces. Of course the audience of the tournament did not know about clients or cubes or talents, beyond those I had already demonstrated. They simply knew. They looked at me and something in their own little minds sparked with recognition. I was the worst of all things— a striver— and I must be destroyed.

"Of course I was not. The machine was crowned (I was frightened, but it was not The Crown), and I and the others were released, with little fanfare, to mingle. I had frankly assumed they all died after I soundly defeated them, so I found this less than comfortable. If the stakes were not mortal, none of them meant anything to me any longer— though I did consider finding the WYRM-cursed man, so I could more thoroughly rub my victory in his supercilious face. I had forgotten to do so previously. Instead, I noted that the doors to the audience seating were open. To the audience seating!

"I rushed—

"But she was already there, of course, red-faced and puffing (I still needed to improve the lung capacity) and speaking in that way I couldn't imitate, all words, all at once, tripping and skidding to the sentence's finish line. My transcription here may not be fully accurate. She went: 'RICHARD OH THANK GOD I THOUGHT THEY'D NEVER LET YOU LEAVE OR ME LEAVE OR ANYBODY WE WERE JUST STUCK THERE AND THEY WOULDN'T LET ME HAVE THE SWORD OR ANYTHING THOUGH THEY DID HAVE SNACKS AT LEAST DID YOU KNOW THEY'VE INVENTED THESE SUGAR BALLS BUT THE OUTSIDE IS SOUR LIKE A LEMON BUT IT'S NOT A LEMON IT'S THIS POWDER? I DON'T KNOW WHETHER I LIKED THEM OR NOT, AND GIL ISN'T HERE— DO YOU KNOW WHERE GIL IS? THEY DIDN'T MAKE HIM DO ALL THOSE DUMB CHALLENGES DID THEY? HE'D GET SO EMBARRASSED! WEREN'T YOU EMBARRASSED? THEY MADE YOU DO SO MANY STUPID THINGS—'

"I assured her that embarrassment was not a factor. To be embarrassed, one must care about the approval of the people watching. I simply tried my best with anything presented to me.

'WITH ANYTHING PRESENTED TO YOU?!? THEY PRESENTED YOU SOME STUPID— SOME REVEALING— SOME DANCE THING, AND YOU WERE IN THOSE TINY SHORTS— AND THE BATTING THING? YOU GOT HIT IN THE FACE!'

"I assured here that it did not hurt, as this was not my real body.

'AND CUP STACKING ISN'T EVEN A REAL THING WHO EVEN DOES THAT, AND— WHY DO YOU LOOK SO TIRED?'

"I assured her that I was incapable of tiring.

'OKAY BUT YOU LOOK PRETTY TIRED RICHARD, AND KIND OF... I DON'T KNOW, SAD...'

"I assured her that I was incapable of being sad. She fixed me with a hard look, of the type she was so good at giving— the eye enhanced them— and I did not say anything. When she found that this could not make me respond, she folded her arms. [I tire of the direct transcription.] Charlotte told me that whether or not I was sad (even though I looked sad), I shouldn't be hypothetically sad, because the contest was worthless— less than worthless— not only was it an obvious front to humiliate the contestants, but it was thoroughly rigged! She had reclaimed memories, she said, of a previous contest of this stripe, which was also thoroughly rigged against her. Against her and I. They hated us in particular, those greater powers, and sought our suffering, so if I was sad about not winning (ending in second place, just to twist the knife), I shouldn't be. And she saw me trying very hard out there, even in all the stupidest of stupid contests. They didn't even have sword-fighting, she said, so what kind of King contest was this? Besides, was I even supposed to be King? She was supposed to be Queen, and I was supposed to be her loyal advisor, and the only reason they left *her* out of the comparative Queen contest is because she'd beat the pants off of everybody there, no sweat. Did I know a stupid great big cat won? Just a cat? I and she were better than any stupid great big cat, she said, and better than any ugly automaton. Though she said she rather liked the little rodent thing, which she found cute, and even the little lizard man. I accepted these things. (After all, I had placed higher than them.)

"When she was done with her speech, Charlie studied my face, and I saw that she was attempting, in her own stunted way, to console me. It could be that she thought that, if my ego were too bruised, she would be the next one to feel it. There was some merit to this, which I regretted. Still, I did not think that was the case. I thought rather that she actually believed all of these things, firstly, and in addition did not like to see me hurt. She saw me as somebody who mattered to her. I had made this so. I could not take it back. I saw her as somebody who mattered to me. I had made this so. I could not take it back. I did not especially want to.

"She must have seen something in my eyes, because she hugged me then. It was the same as the others: hot, crushing, her hair caught in my collar and armpits and everywhere else. She did not take things by half measures. Me? I am not built for hugging. I mean this factually. The incentives for hugging are nebulous

and limited, and the whole process was messy. It was imperfect. The offspring of the WYRM are perfect; they do not 'hug'.

"Charlotte is not perfect (imagine!) and so she hugged me like she meant to pop my ribs. I have been ruined and so I hugged her back and ruffled her hair and murmured to the back of her head that I was glad she's safe, and that was what mattered, more than any arbitrary tournament. The Crown we'd be obtaining was worth a thousand of the machine's. In the end, this was a temporary diversion.

"I don't know if she heard me. She went on hugging, and I thought that it wasn't me she actually meant to hug. I thought that if she knew she wouldn't hug me like this at all. It wasn't mine and didn't belong to me.

"I thought that regretting it meant, maybe, that I still deserved it. In one sense or another.

"I don't know what I thought, because space and time were slipping, and Charlotte was liquefying in my arms. I breathed her in and coughed: saline. The ground was liquifying too and gurgled upward and enveloped me and took my skin off with it. I floated, denuded and lengthened and uncomprehending, until by chance I twisted my neck and banged against the tube and remembered.

"I was back. If I had ever left: if it was not just a vivid IV-dream, an increasingly plausible explanation, and one that required far fewer questions answered. That was not Charlotte; I had not seen her in days. A cruel figment only. But I would see her soon, if she was alive, if she was well, and if she did not know. She would not want me if she knew. I cross my fingers.

"Richard"

